

VZCZCXRO1778
PP RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHCHI #0057/01 0940236
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P R 030236Z APR 08
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0731
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHINGTON DC
RUEFHLC/DEPT OF HOMELAND SECURITY WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHINGTON DC
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0787

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000057

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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STATE FOR G/TIP - MARK TAYLOR, SALLY NEUMANN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KCRM](#) [KWMN](#) [SMIG](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: AN NGO PERSPECTIVE ON ANTI-TRAFFICKING EFFORTS IN NORTHERN THAILAND

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Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

Summary

1. (SBU) Most Burmese who become trafficking victims knowingly enter Thailand illegally, but fall prey to deception and coercion after crossing the border, according to the head of a key anti-trafficking NGO operating in the region. Child prostitution has diminished significantly in northern Thailand, owing to years of work with senior police officials who now have a "clear understanding" of the problem. Judicial processes have also improved. Testimony by victims is treated sensitively in an increasing number of cases and courts are beginning to permit testimony by remote camera so trafficking victims do not have to face perpetrators who could still exact retribution. A continuing lack of police professionalism, however, could lead to entrapment and blackmail if concerted action were attempted against the demand side of prostitution. The Thai government is now contributing to the funding of anti-trafficking NGOs, but they remain heavily dependent on USG support. End Summary.

Child Prostitution Suppressed, but Challenges Remain

2. (SBU) On March 20, Econ Counselor, who was visiting from Bangkok, met with Ben Svasti, Program Director for Traficord, an NGO that serves as a coordination body between the Royal Thai Government (RTG) and other NGOs combating trafficking-in-persons (TIP). Svasti explained that many Burmese, men and women, come to Thailand looking for work, mostly in construction and other labor intensive industries. Those trafficked into prostitution generally come from among young women hoping for jobs in restaurants. Typically, they work willingly with friends or agents to cross the border illegally. Once on the Thai side, however, their illegal status makes them vulnerable to deception and coercion from trafficking agents. According to Svasti, northern Thailand is not the final destination for many TIP victims. Many are taken to Bangkok, Singapore, or Malaysia. Since its founding in 2003, the work of Traficord and its network has led to the arrest of 111 individuals involved in human trafficking.

3. (SBU) Svasti said that child prostitution is much less

severe than in the past. In northern Thailand, the practice is suppressed; child prostitution is "much harder to find." Svasti attributes this success to years of work with senior police officials in the region. They "clearly understand" the problem now. Senior provincial and police officials know that if we hear reports that there are child prostitutes in any venue, Svasti explained, we will conduct a raid, with accompanying press and publicity. Acknowledging a point made by EconCouns, he said that child prostitution may have gone further underground, but even if it were true that child prostitution had been eradicated, there is no doubt in his mind that if the pressure against it were relaxed, it would come back.

¶4. (SBU) Significant challenges on the "push" side remain. Burmese leave their villages because there is no work. If they are simply caught and repatriated back to their villages, the continuing lack of work and raised family and village expectations often cause them to return to Thailand, even if they have already been trafficking victims. Svasti says that whenever possible, his organization tries to work with international NGOs such as Save the Children or World Vision where they have operations inside Burma. Re-integration programs are essential if the return rate is to be reduced. Unfortunately, the areas in which these organizations operate inside Burma are limited.

Improvements on the Legal Front

¶5. (SBU) On the judicial front, Svasti cited significant improvements. Not only are police much more aware of the problem and cooperative than they were in the past, but prosecutors are more willing to take on trafficking cases. Inside courtrooms, procedures are slowly moving up to international standards. In some courts, judges now allow testimony to be given via remote camera so that victims will not have to testify publicly in front of perpetrators who may still

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have the means to exact retribution. Child witnesses are interviewed only once, by trained social workers, with their story recorded on video for later use in court. Things have come a long way, Svasti related, from the days when victims were repeatedly made to recount painful details by insensitive low-level policemen.

¶6. (SBU) Challenges remain, however. Not all prosecutors are eager to take on trafficking cases. Some policemen still are using enforcement guides printed decades ago, when prostitution charges could only be filed if perpetrators were caught in the act, making it almost impossible to bring charges against traffickers and brothel owners when those they had abused were able to escape or had been rescued. Trafford's newest initiative in the legal arena is to press the RTG to allow TIP victims to have their civil cases considered within the scope of the criminal proceedings. Currently, civil suits cannot be initiated until the criminal cases are finished. By that time, many victims have been through enough and are unwilling to begin another lengthy legal process.

¶7. (SBU) In response to a question from EconCouns, Svasti agreed that the best situation would be for prostitution to be suppressed across the board. However, he expressed concern that a concerted effort now to arrest the "johns" seeking prostitution may result in widespread entrapment and blackmail because Thai police forces, while better than in the past, still do not meet international standards for professionalism. He did note, however, that things have progressed with regard to child prostitution to the point where he believes that a foreign tourist today who openly sought a child prostitute would likely be reported to the police. The fact remains that there is a lot of money involved in prostitution. Moreover, societal tolerance and expectations are such that an effort to suppress it more widely would meet resistance from many quarters.

¶8. (SBU) Right now, approximately 90 percent of Trafcord's funding comes from the USG, with the additional 10 percent coming from the government. However, the government's funds are targeted for training and education projects and cannot be used to meet Trafcord's operating costs and salary expenses. In the past, UNICEF has funded up to 25 percent, but is rethinking its program support and appears inclined toward targeting child rights more broadly rather than the anti-child prostitution focus that Trafcord has concentrated on in the past.

Comment

¶9. (SBU) Having handled the anti-trafficking portfolio in Embassy Bangkok in the mid-1990s, Econ Counselor was impressed with the progress that has evidently been made in the suppression of child prostitution since then. Underscoring Trafcord's claims, another NGO, the IJM, ceased anti-child prostitution operations in northern Thailand because there is so little to do now. Svasti's claims that if Trafcord's work does not continue child prostitution could re-emerge are obviously self-serving, but in our view are nevertheless true. Sex tourism in general, and child sex tourism in particular, are not openly tolerated as in the past, but general attitudes toward prostitution may take a generation to fundamentally change.

¶10. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
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